One Size Fits All

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It is hard for anyone who has not had personal experience of prisons to conjure up any image of their appalling reality. They are, even at their best, places of torture: at their worst they are so bad that only men of the lowest organization can endure them. It is not the loss of liberty that drives the men in them to frenzy: it is the intolerable rigidity, monotony and imbecility of their routine. Their arrangements, like those of the public schools, are made to meet the needs and character of inmates at the very bottom of the scale. No wonder prisoners of a higher caliber — and some of the most bold and incorrigible criminals are of a higher caliber — find life in them quite insupportable, and prefer death to a continuance of it.

Theoretically, these prisoners are wards of the law, which is supposed to be impersonal. But that supposition is as absurd in this case as it is in every other. The plain fact is that the men are the slaves of their keepers. It is these keepers who determine whether their imprisonment shall be tolerable or an endless agony, whether they shall be left with some common hope and spirit when they emerge or go out as complete wrecks. It is these keepers, under the maudlin parole system, who chiefly determine how long they shall be incarcerated. If you want to find out what sort of men hold such grave powers over their fellow human beings, go to any prison and palaver with the first keeper you meet. And if you have no access to prisons, then try to figure out what sort of men are likely to seek and cherish such jobs. Here I say nothing against the keepers as individuals. They do the best they can: many of them, I believe by sound evidence, are humane and even sentimental men. But it would be absurd to look for superior intelligence in them. They are, as every test made of them has shown, ignorant and simple-minded men, and not infrequently of a mentality below that of the average of their charges. They do the best they can — but what they are asked to do in the name of justice and righteousness would daunt a herd of Platos.

It is an ironical fact that all this penning of men in cages, all this frightful effort to hammer them into docility, all this cruel outraging of their primary instincts, is done in the name of humanity. The modern prison, in fact, is humanitarianism's masterpiece. It is a monument to its tears. There was a time when imprisonment was a rare punishment. Men were thrown into jails to await trial, but when they were tried at last they were commonly punished in other ways. Some were put to death. Others were deported. Others were flogged. Others lost certain civil rights. Yet others were mutilated.

But all these various and protean punishments were eventually outlawed by the humanitarians. They denounced capital punishment, though it at least got rid of the concrete criminal. They denounced flogging, though offenders who had once tasted it wanted no more of it. They denounced mutilation, though it robbed a pickpocket of his chief tool. They denounced deportation, though it

turned many a felon into an honest and useful man. There remained only imprisonment. During the past century it has almost completely supplanted all other modes of punishment. Hangings grow rare, and flogging is seldom heard of. No one is mutilated any more. No one is deported, at least in America. One and all, large and small all professionals and accidentals, men who run afoul of the law are cast into cages, and there held at the disposal of morons.

The astounding thing is that all this witless and shocking cruelty is inflicted in the name of mercy — that Jack is bidden to believe he was favored when he was delivered from the gallows. It is hard to imagine anything more stupid. Would it have been more cruel to hang him quickly than it is to torture him all the days of his life? He is one, obviously, whose doings had to be stopped. He was a professional murderer, and while he ran at large no man's life was safe. Well, are the keepers' lives safe while he is in prison? Will the rest of us be safe the next time he breaks out — with a maniacal lust for revenge on society reinforcing his natural villainy? It is absurd to talk of reforming such men. The machinery for reforming them is crazily inadequate, even assuming that they are reformable, which is not proved. The thing to do is lo get rid of them at the first chance, as quietly and humanely as possible. If the poor simpletons told off to purge the world of them are unequal to the childish task, then let us get better ones. But let us stop penning them in cages, and goading them to more crimes.

The majority of prisoners give their keepers no concern. They arc dull and unimaginative fellows, with little courage. Many of them are as comfortable in prison as hogs in a wallow. But the men of the minority — the bold, enterprising, pugnacious fellows — keep every prison in an uproar. They begin to plan escape the moment they get in, and they never abandon the hope. They get the worst of it every day because their keepers fear them. They make fear the hallmark of the whole place. In order to hold them every other prisoner however harmless, must be tortured too. It must be hell to guard such fellows, year after year. Now and then one kills a keeper, escapes, sets the place into an uproar. He is caught, brought back, tortured some more. He tries to escape again. He kills a keeper. He is recaptured, brought back, hanged. The rules are made more drastic. Every prisoner suffers abominably. And the really bad ones go to dungeons. What a folly! What a cruelty! Prison is no more a place for these men than a Y.M.C.A. would be. It tortures them quite as irrationally, and almost as brutally. The thing to do with such professionals is to hang them at the first chance. The humanity of imprisonment is as false and fraudulent as the humanity of Prohibition.

But what of those culprits whose offenses do not justify doing them to death — whose continued existence is not a certain and ever-present danger to all of us? I see no difficulties in the problem. It needs only the most elemental ingenuity and common sense. Some time ago, as I recall it, a young man was sentenced in Baltimore to twenty years' imprisonment for a banal hold-up. He will get out, to be sure, in five or ten years, but meanwhile he will be brutalized and his life will be made useless. Wouldn't it have been better to give him a good lashing and then tum him out?

But the knout is degrading? It destroys self-respect? Well, what of sitting in a cage for twenty years?